

Book Review: Acharya, Amitav (2017), East of India, South of China: Sino-Indian Encounters in Southeast Asia

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Book Reviews

Acharya, Amitav (2017), *East of India, South of China: Sino-Indian Encounters in Southeast Asia*

New Delhi: Oxford University Press, ISBN: 13: 978-0-19-946114-1 & 10: 0-19-946114-7, 235 pages

Reading the prolific Amitav Acharya's book reminded me of a 2001 interview of the late-Lee Kuan Yew conducted by Arnaud de Borchgrave. Renowned for his sense of history and dynamic grasp of geostrategic reality, Lee said that the biggest threat to the status quo was the seemingly "inexorable" rise of China and India, "two old civilisations that are poised to rise again and will return to their global dominance in a few decades." In subsequent speeches, he warned that the two giants should not end up in opposing camps. In his words, "As you go back to the old balance, Chinese and Indian influence will meet in Southeast Asia, and they should meet in a cooperative and positive competitive mode, not an adversarial mode, then all will prosper."

Acharya's concise and highly readable book has unpacked for readers what Lee said in a few sentences. It is indeed a timely book because there is no dispute that "both China and India are well and truly back in the game" (p. 221). The book also contributes to filling a gap in the literature. While there is an abundance of literature on China–Southeast Asia relations, US–Southeast Asia relations, and China–US–Southeast Asian relations, there are comparatively less written on India–Southeast Asia relations and China–India–Southeast Asia relations.

The book bears the trademarks of Acharya. Those familiar with his writings know that he is acknowledged as the leading international relations scholar to approach the study of Southeast Asia through the lens of constructivism. As he states in the "Introduction," the book brings India back into the picture "by looking not at India's role in Asia from [...] a 'Curzonian geopolitical perspective, but from an ideational and normative perspective', but at the same time with and an eye on the importance of geopolitics" (p. xvi). Acharya is also that rare international relations specialist whose writings are historically grounded.

Systematically presented, the book begins with a historical survey of Asia as a region and the many terms used to describe the region. Acharya counts 13 different ways in which Asia has been described (p. 2). The chapter goes on to describe the multiple conceptions of Asia: "Imperialist Asia," "Universalist Asia," "Nationalist Asia," "Regionalist Asia,"

and “Exceptionalist Asia.” There are three takeaways from this thoughtful chapter: Asia is as much an ideational as a material construct; Asia is not merely the sum of its parts; and Asia will increasingly be constructed from within rather than from without (p. 24).

The book then moves on to explore India’s present relations with Southeast Asia in the light of its past, providing a competent overview of India–Southeast Asia relations from the pre-colonial period to the first decade post-Cold War and culminating in the “Look East” policy. This policy offered India “a chance to put its relationship with Southeast Asia on a new footing and return to the region where it was once seen as a leader [...]” (p. 53). Acharya ends the chapter with some advice: That it is far better for Southeast Asians to highlight “India’s civilizational influence” than for Indian scholars to belabour the point at every opportunity. And, “there is no room for a return to cultural or diplomatic arrogance as was evident during the early post-war period” (p. 54).

The following two chapters (chapters 3 and 4) focus in some detail on the Bandung Conference. The Bandung Conference was the “high point of India’s post-war engagement not only with Southeast Asia but also Asia as a whole” (p. xx). It was also the high point of China’s engagement with Southeast Asia during the Cold War period. Chapter 4 recounts how India’s relationship with China evolved prior to and during the Bandung Conference. Acharya has kept close to the conventional narrative of the relationship between Bandung and the Non-aligned Movement (NAM), and the importance of Nehru’s role. However, in recent years historians, especially those who have looked at East European archival documents, argue that in fact it was Tito and not Nehru who was most responsible for the establishment of NAM.

Chapter 5 is the longest chapter of the book. It addresses the question of the place of India, China, and Southeast Asia in the Asian order. Acharya makes the argument that neither the Chinese “tributary system” nor “Indianization” is likely to define both countries’ engagement with the region. In fact, their influence could be complementary. Acharya disagrees with the realist view that the two rising powers would “challenge and disrupt international order.” Instead, he points out that India and China are behaving as “status-quo” powers, and “with free trade and transnational production acting as agents of prosperity, the contemporary international system does make it possible for countries to become wealthy and satisfied without international stability, China and India included” (p. 178). Whereas, the previous two chapters show off the “historian” Acharya, this chapter, peppered with references to international relations theory, shows off the “IR” Acharya. Chapter 5 and the

final, and substantial, Chapter 6 will appeal to those who are more interested in current developments as they focus on the contemporary issues and debates. Addressing the question of where Asia can lead in the emerging global order, both chapters discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both India and China, the two largest countries in the region. Acharya is of the view that China has not offered leadership (although it has been less reticent but still cautious in assuming a regional leadership role) (p. 194), and that India's "policy of non-alignment has not been replaced by any broad organizing framework" (p. 194).

I started with a reference to Lee Kuan Yew and I will end with the same. In 2009, Lee argued that the longer-term strategic challenges for the US are not Iraq or Afghanistan, but the resurgence of China and India. In his words, "they are not going to change the world, whatever happens there, but the major change taking place is the recovery of China, and to a lesser extent India." If Lee is right (and he has been proven right more often than not in the area of geopolitics), Amitav Acharya has chosen well to write this book. The reader may not agree with all his conclusions, but the book is undoubtedly informative and a stimulating read.

Ang Cheng Guan

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